



**North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Public Affairs**

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Eastern North Carolina Wildfires Take Toll on the Public's Health in Coastal Counties

The N.C. Division of Public Health has been monitoring hospital visits for acute respiratory conditions in the Piedmont and Eastern regions of the state and has observed an increase in visits to hospital emergency departments in the following coastal counties for the week of June 18-24: Beaufort, Bertie, Carteret, Dare, New Hanover and Pender.

Data from the North Carolina Disease Event Tracking and Epidemiologic Collection Tool (N.C. DETECT) indicates that a significant increase in acute respiratory hospital visits was observed on June 19. However, these visits have since returned to normal. No significant increases in asthma or acute respiratory conditions were observed in the Triangle region, where smoky conditions occurred this week.

Local residents and visitors to some North Carolina beaches should be aware that forest fires present health risks for everyone, but smoke may make symptoms worse for people who already have conditions such as respiratory allergies, asthma, heart conditions and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

The Division of Public Health reminds people with asthma to follow your doctor's advice about medications and about your respiratory management plan if you have asthma or another lung condition. A respiratory management plan involves tracking symptoms to determine when to use additional medications or seek medical treatment. These symptoms may include difficulty in breathing normally; cough with or without mucus; chest discomfort; and wheezing and shortness of breath.

"While older people are usually at risk for health problems resulting from smoke exposure, we also want to be sure that parents are watching out for children who may be exposed," State Health Director Dr. Jeff Engel said. "Children's airways are still developing and they take in more air per pound of body weight than adults, so we encourage parents to limit children's exposure outside when the air quality is poor."

As smoky conditions persist, the general public is encouraged to take precautions to avoid illness as well, including:

1. If you are advised to stay indoors, keep indoor air as clean as possible. Do not smoke. Avoid vacuuming unless there is a HEPA filter vacuum or central vacuum system. Do not use air purifying ozone generators.
2. Have a several-day supply of nonperishable groceries. Avoid cooking with gas, wood, or propane stoves if possible.
3. If you develop symptoms suggestive of lung or heart problems, consult a health-care provider as soon as possible.
4. Pay attention to local air quality reports; check newspaper and web site reports <http://xapps.enr.state.nc.us/aq/ForecastCenter>
5. Avoid physical exertion when air quality is poor. Be aware that outdoor events, such as athletic games or competitions, may be postponed or cancelled if smoke levels become elevated.

(cont'd)



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6. Do not rely on dust masks for protection, such as the paper “comfort” or “dust” masks commonly found at hardware stores. These masks will not protect your lungs from fine particles and gases found in smoke. Breathing through a mask is harder than breathing in open air and may cause additional health problems in people with lung diseases such as asthma or emphysema, elderly people, heart disease.

If you have heart or lung disease, such as congestive heart failure, angina, COPD, emphysema, or asthma, you are at higher risk of having health problems than healthy people. Contact your doctor if you are experiencing symptoms such as chest pain, chest tightness, shortness of breath or severe fatigue.

For more information on asthma and other respiratory conditions, as well as resources to help manage asthma, visit <http://www.asthma.ncdhhs.gov/ncapResources.htm>

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